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AUTHOR	Jucovy, Linda
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ABSTRACT

It is estimated that up to 10% of the U.S. population is lesbian or gay. Being a member of a sexual minority group places youth at risk. Along with the challenges all adolescents deal with, lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender youth must cope with prejudice, discrimination, and violence in schools or in their families. While mentoring programs and volunteers may be attentive to some of the circumstances that make youth's lives difficult or painful, many overlook the fact that a youth's sexuality may be causing him or her to feel isolated, threatened, and afraid. Many people feel uncomfortable dealing with the subject of lesbian and gay youth. This report describes the significant multiple obstacles confronting lesbian and gay youth that may restrict their chances for successful lives. Suggestions are given for mentoring programs so that youth will perceive them as a safe and welcoming place in which to participate. Implications for training mentors are also explored. A resource section lists further readings, videos, and curriculum material that may be used in a mentoring program. Nine appendixes provide further information, tips on working with gay youth, and questions for gay youth to think about. (Contains 17 Web sites and 19 references.) (JDM)

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Technical Assistance Packet #2

NATIONAL **MENTORING** CENTER

ED 449 434

MENTORING SEXUAL MINORITY YOUTH

A PUBLICATION OF:

WITH SUPPORT FROM:

OJJDP

PPV

NATIONAL YOUTH ADVOCACY COALITION

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
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NWREL Executive Director/CEO:
DR. ETHEL SIMON-MCWILLIAMS

National Mentoring Center Interim Director:
DR. REX HAGANS

Author:
LINDA JUCOVY @ P/PV

Editors:
SUZIE BOSS, MICHAEL GARRINGER

Graphic Designer:
MICHAEL GARRINGER

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NATIONAL
MENTORING
CENTER

Technical Assistance Packet #2

Mentoring Sexual Minority Youth

By Linda Jucovy
@
Public/Private Ventures
December 2000

with support from:

OJJDP

P/PV

NATIONAL YOUTH ADVOCACY COALITION

BIG BROTHERS BIG SISTERS OF AMERICA

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Introduction

"How do you know you're a lesbian?" I get that all the time. I say, "How do you know you're straight?"

—an 11th-grader

What are the circumstances that put youth at risk? The usual answers—all of them correct—include poverty, living in stressed and violent communities, and/or being a member of ethnic or racial minority groups that must deal with overt and masked prejudice and discrimination. These are the youth most of us picture when we think about the millions of Americans who are, in the words of the National Research Council, "growing up in circumstances that limit the development of their potential, compromise their health, impair their sense of self, and generally restrict their chances for successful lives."[1]

There is, however, an additional correct answer to the question. Being a member of a sexual minority group also places youth at risk. Along with the challenges that all adolescents deal with, lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender youth must cope with prejudice, discrimination, and verbal and physical violence in their schools and families. While mentoring programs and their volunteers are attentive to other circumstances that make youth's lives difficult or painful, they may be overlooking the fact that a youth's sexual orientation is causing her or him to feel isolated, threatened, and afraid.

It is estimated that up to 10 percent of the U.S. population is lesbian or gay.[2] Thus, if your program serves teen-agers, you can assume that some of your participants are members of this sizable sexual minority. Understanding the issues these young people are facing can help you create an environment where they can benefit from the adult caring and support that is at the heart of mentoring.

Many people feel uncomfortable dealing with the subject of lesbian and gay youth, even if they are not consciously aware of their discomfort. To avoid discomfort, they might prefer to put the subject aside. To help you understand why it is important for your program to be attentive to this issue, the following material first describes the significant multiple obstacles that confront lesbian and gay youth and restrict their chances for successful lives. The following sections then suggest some initial steps your program can take so it will feel safe and welcoming to these youth and explore the implications for training your mentors. A final section lists additional resources. The Appendix includes materials that may be helpful for your staff and your mentors.

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[1] National Research Council. (1993). *Losing Generations: Adolescents in High-Risk Settings*. Washington, DC: National Academy Press.

[2] This estimate, from the Kinsey Institute, is cited in "Questions Often Asked By Family and Friends" on the UCLA Lesbian Gay Bisexual Transgender Resource Center Web site at: www.lgbt.ucla.edu/questions.html

A NOTE ON TERMS:

While the Appendix includes a list of expanded definitions, two terms are useful to know immediately because they are sometimes confusing to people:

- Sexual orientation refers to whether a person is attracted to people of the same sex (homosexual), opposite sex (heterosexual), or both sexes (bisexual).

- Gender identity refers to whether a person identifies as a female or male, regardless of that person's biological gender. Transgender people are those whose psychological self ("gender identity") differs from the social expectations for the biological gender they were born with.

The following pages focus on youth who are lesbian, gay, and bisexual (aspects of sexual orientation), and transgender (an aspect of gender identity). Note that the phrase "lesbian and gay youth" is used throughout—that phrase is used inclusively to refer to bisexual and transgender youth as well.

Recognizing the Risks for Youth

Imagine what it's like to grow up gay/lesbian in America. When you're little, you feel different, but you don't know what this feeling is all about. And then you're an adolescent and you start to realize what this different feeling is, but you cannot talk about it to anyone. Then you're a young adult, and the whole society tells you that the way you feel is abnormal. And then you fall in love with someone, and just like heterosexual people, you want to shout it from the rooftops, and when things aren't going right, you need to talk about that too. But you can't because you've been taught that what you feel is not right. You've been taught by society that this love you feel is sinful, and you've learned to hide your true feelings. You've been taught to hate the way you feel. There's this piece of yourself that you've been taught to hate.

—a woman whose daughter, a lesbian, committed suicide at age 19

Why are lesbian and gay youth at risk? What are the circumstances, as stated by the National Research Council, that "restrict their chances for successful lives"? This section describes some of the forms of prejudice and harassment that lesbian and gay youth must deal with, the effects on them, and the particular risks they face as a consequence.

TWO DEFINITIONS

People don't choose their sexual orientation; they discover it. Given the cultural and social pressures in this country, youth (and adults, for that matter) who discover they are lesbian or gay most often initially respond by hiding this fact from their friends, families, and even, in a sense, from themselves. The following two definitions are helpful for understanding why the discovery of their sexual orientation can be painful and isolating for lesbian and gay adolescents:

Homophobia: The irrational fear, disgust, or hatred of gays, lesbians, or bisexuals. Homophobia refers to the discomfort one feels with any behavior, belief, or attitude that does not conform to traditional sex-role stereotypes. Homophobia results in fear of knowing, befriending, or associating with gays, lesbians, or bisexuals, and fear of being perceived as gay, lesbian, or bisexual.

Internalized homophobia: The internalization (by lesbian, gay, and bisexual youth and adults) of the belief that same-gender sexual orientation is inferior to heterosexual orientation. This internalization of negative messages and feelings about oneself often leads to difficulty with self-acceptance and to self-hate.

Adolescence is a difficult time for most youth. They are besieged by messages from their friends, schoolmates, families, and the media about how they should "be"—about what is acceptable and what is not. And being accepted is of overwhelming importance. Surrounded by messages that heterosexuality is "normal" and anything else is "wrong," lesbian and gay youth, and youth who are questioning whether they are gay or straight, may internalize these

messages and disapprove of themselves. As one 16-year-old wrote in his diary, "I can't let anyone find out that I'm not straight. It would be so humiliating. My friends would hate me, I just know it."[3]

A Few Facts

Neither school nor home is a safe place for lesbian and gay youth:

1. **They are met with harassment and violence in school**. A recent national survey found that:

- More than 90 percent of lesbian and gay youth reported that they frequently or sometimes hear homophobic remarks in their school (words such as "faggot," "dyke," or "queer")
- More than 36 percent of the youth reported hearing homophobic remarks from faculty or school staff
- More than a quarter (27 percent) of the lesbian and gay youth reported experiences of physical harassment, such as being shoved or pushed
- More than 13 percent reported experiences of physical assault, including being beaten and kicked[4]

Other studies report similar findings. A year-long study of public schools in Des Moines, Iowa, found that the average high school student hears anti-gay comments 26 times a day. A study of the Seattle Public Schools revealed that, in a single year, one out of every six lesbian and gay youth was beaten up so badly at school that she or he had to seek medical attention.[5]

2. **They are met with harassment and violence at home**. In a survey conducted in Philadelphia, 34 percent of lesbians and 33 percent of gay males reported experiencing harassment and/or physical violence from family members as a result of their sexual orientation.[6]

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[3] Gay, Lesbian and Straight Education Network BlackBoard On-Line. (2000). *Youth Suicide* (No longer available on www.glsen.org. Last accessed 7/24/00)

[4] Survey conducted in 32 states by the Gay, Lesbian and Straight Education Network. Reported in *GLSEN's National School Climate Survey: Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender Students and Their Experiences in School.* Also cited on the GLSEN Web site at: http://glsen.org/templates/resources/record.html?section=17&record=24

[5] Savin-Williams, R.C. (1994). Verbal and physical abuse as stressors in the lives of lesbian, gay male, and bisexual youth: Associations with school problems, running away, substance abuse, prostitution, and suicide. *Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology*. 62:261-269.

[6] Gross, L. & Aurand, S. (1996) *Discrimination and Violence Against Lesbian Women and Gay Men in Philadelphia and The Commonwealth of Pennsylvania: A Study by the Philadelphia Lesbian and Gay Task Force*. Philadelphia: Philadelphia Lesbian and Gay Task Force.

The harassment at school and home has potentially life-limiting consequences:

- Lesbian and gay youth are more than four times as likely as their "straight" peers to skip whole days of school out of fear, and approximately 28 percent of lesbian and gay youth drop out of high school before graduating.[7]

- As many as 25 percent of young males are kicked out of their homes when their families discover their sexual orientation.[8] In fact, it is estimated that 40 percent of homeless young people in major U.S. cities are gay or lesbian, with many resorting to "survival sex" for food, clothing, and shelter.[9]

Surrounded as they are by negative messages about themselves, sexual minority youth often struggle with low self-esteem. And they feel hopeless about the possibility of feeling more positively about themselves in the future—one study of lesbian and gay youth, ages 14 to 17, found that half believed that all homosexuals are unhappy.[10] As a result, they are less likely than heterosexual youth to value their own lives. Lesbian and gay youth are at high risk of:

- **Alcohol and other drug abuse**. In a study where youth self-reported on their behavior, lesbian and gay youth were two times more likely to use alcohol, three times more likely to use marijuana, and eight times more likely to use cocaine/crack than their heterosexual peers.[11]

- **HIV infection**. Ongoing studies show that both HIV prevalence and risky behavior remain high among young gay and bisexual males. For example, one study of six urban counties, conducted by the Centers for Disease Control (CDC), found that between 5 and 8 percent of gay and bisexual males, ages 15 to 22, were infected with HIV. The highest prevalence was among young African American males (13 percent), while 5 percent of young Latino males and 4 percent of young White males were infected.[12]

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[7] Savin-Williams. (see Footnote 5).

[8] Remafedi, G. (1994). *Death by Denial : Studies of Suicide in Gay and Lesbian Teenagers*. Boston: Alyson Publications. (cited on the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force website at: www.ngltf.org/youthinfo.htm)

[9] Orion Center. (1986). *Survey of Street Youth*. Seattle, WA: Author. (cited in Savin-Williams)

[10] Ryan, C. & Futterman, D. (1997). *Lesbian and Gay Youth: Care and Counseling*. New York: Columbia University Press

[11] Telljohann, S.K., et al. (1995). Teaching about sexual orientation by secondary health teachers. *Journal of School Health*. 65:18-22.

[12] National Center for HIV, STD and TB Prevention, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. (2000). *Young People at Risk: HIV/AIDS Among America's Youth*. Fact sheet on the CDC Web site at: www.cdc.gov/hiv/pubs/facts/youth.htm

- **Suicide**. Suicide is the leading cause of death among lesbian and gay adolescents. According to a report by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS), lesbian and gay youth are two to three times more likely to attempt suicide than their heterosexual peers; they are estimated to comprise up to 30 percent of completed adolescent suicides each year.[13] The gay teenager whose diary entry is quoted earlier in this section was one of those suicides: he killed himself when he was 16 years old.

In light of these alarming statistics, the HHS report recommended that youth-serving agencies train their personnel on issues that affect lesbian and gay youth, and provide acceptance and support for these young people. The following two sections describe steps you can take to accomplish this.

[13]Gibson, P. (1989) *Gay Male and Lesbian Youth Suicide: Report of the Secretary's Task Force on Youth Suicide.* Washington, DC: U. S. Department of Health and Human Services.

Making Your Organization Feel Safe

My science teacher put a small pink triangle [a symbol of solidarity with gays and lesbians] on the wall of the classroom. I said, "Wow, this guy really cares. This is a safe place for me."

—a seventh-grader

Lesbian and gay youth have legitimate expectations that they will be harassed, hurt, or rejected if they share anything about themselves with another person. Thus, they are unlikely to talk about how they feel or what they are experiencing. Organizations have to take the lead in creating an environment where the youth feel accepted and safe, an environment where they can find the adult support that is missing in their lives.

There are several uncomplicated but important steps that organizations can take to create this environment:

1. **Become knowledgeable about the issues facing sexual minority youth.** In addition to the information in the previous section, read the materials included in the Appendix. You can use the "Additional Resources" section to locate further information.

2. **Learn what resources are available to lesbian and gay youth in your community.** Use the Yellow Pages of the telephone book and the Internet to identify local organizations that advocate for, and serve, sexual minority youth. These organizations can provide you with additional information and can be helpful if you decide to conduct staff development or mentor training specifically on the issues of lesbian and gay youth.

3. **Develop a resource list for staff, mentors, and youth.** The list can include the names and contact information for local organizations; Web sites and hotlines for youth (several are listed in the "Additional Resources" section); and information about the coming-out process (see the Appendix for an information sheet on this topic). In rural areas, particularly, there may be no local resources. However, the Internet has become an important tool for helping youth feel less isolated and connected, wherever they happen to live.

4. **Watch your language.** Use inclusive language in your materials. Don't use language that assumes all adults are heterosexual. For example, on volunteer application forms, ask whether applicants are married only if you have a strong reason for doing so. Similarly, in recruitment materials and materials you give mentors during training, don't include language that assumes all teenagers are heterosexual. Thus, if you give mentors a handout on developmental characteristics of 14-to-16 year olds, avoid saying that one characteristic is "they are beginning to have relationships with members of the opposite sex." Instead, you can say something like "they are beginning to have romantic relationships."

5. **Create guidelines that protect the young people in your program.** A first step toward creating these guidelines might be to write a statement on diversity that defines your organization's acceptance of all youth. (A sample statement is included in the Appendix.) That statement can then become the philosophical foundation for your guidelines, which could include such principles as: don't assume all youth are heterosexual; be aware of your own attitudes and stereotypes; use inclusive language; and maintain confidentiality.

6. **Be attentive to what materials and artwork are visible in your office.** Check out the titles of the books on your office shelves. Are any of them about the issues facing lesbian and gay youth? As you read more about these issues in books like *Two Teenagers in Twenty* (see "Additional Resources"), you can add those books to the other youth development materials on your office shelves. Even a simple gesture like placing a sticker of a pink triangle or a rainbow triangle on your wall—the triangles symbolize acceptance of all sexual orientations—sends a signal that lesbian and gay youth are welcome in your program. (SMYAL—the Sexual Minority Youth Assistance League—has a Safe Zone program that offers posters, buttons, and stickers. See their Web address in "Additional Resources.")

In addition, you may want to provide staff development on issues of homophobia, the particular challenges facing lesbian and gay youth, and the ways those youth can best be supported. The Appendix includes a list of "Tips for Professionals Who Work with Gay Youth," and "Tips for Staff Development." You might also want to contact a local organization that serves the lesbian and gay community to help you plan and conduct a staff development session.

And finally, when you provide training for your mentors, you can integrate information about the special issues facing lesbian and gay youth and the mentor's role in supporting the youth. The next section provides some suggestions.

Implications for Training Mentors

I came out to my classmates when I was in seventh grade. I was harassed, followed home, and people threw firecrackers at me. They called me all the names. I was harassed every minute of every day that I went to school. One day when I was in the eighth grade, I was called into the principal's office and he said, "You brought this on yourself."

—a 10th-grader

To help new mentors acquire the information and develop the skills that will help them succeed, programs often provide training in agency policies, the mentor's role, good communication skills (especially "active listening"), and understanding and respecting differences. During these sessions, trainers often focus on the particular kinds of issues the youth in their program are facing. Since it is likely that at least some of the youth in your program are lesbian or gay, it makes sense to integrate information about their particular challenges into your training sessions.

The following are examples of ways you can achieve this integration:

- **Discuss your organization's policy on diversity**. Give mentors a copy of your written policy and discuss all aspects of its inclusiveness, including lesbian and gay youth. (See the Appendix for a sample statement on diversity.)

- **Discuss your organization's confidentiality requirements**. Give examples of confidentiality issues that might arise, including issues with lesbian and gay youth. What if a youth reveals that he is gay and asks the mentor for information or advice the mentor does not feel qualified to give? Should the mentor get an "OK" from the youth before asking program staff to help access the information? Suppose the youth tells the mentor, "I'm quitting school because everyone there is hassling me and calling me a 'fag.'" In relation to the youth's statement about dropping out of school, what is the mentor's responsibility to the agency and to the youth's parent or guardian, within the context of your confidentiality requirements?

- **When exploring mentors' roles, have participants discuss what they would do if their mentee came out to them (revealed that they were lesbian or gay)**. Because they are trusted adults, mentors sometimes find themselves in potentially difficult situations. For example, a mentee may reveal that she is pregnant and deciding whether or not to have an abortion. Similarly, a mentee may reveal that she or he thinks she/he might be, or is, lesbian or gay. How can the mentor best show support?

- **Help mentors become aware of their own attitudes toward people whose sexual orientation is different than their own**. The boxed activity on the next page is one effective way to help people begin to recognize their own prejudices and habits of labeling others.

- **When participants practice communication skills, guide them to use inclusive language, especially non-specific pronouns.** For example, if a mentee tells her mentor she went on a date to the movies on Saturday night, the mentor should not assume the date was with a "he." ("Tips for Volunteers: Mentoring Lesbian and Gay Youth," included in the Appendix, contains more information on using gender-neutral language.)

- **During communication role-plays, have some of the situations address homophobia.** For example, participants could role-play how they would respond if their mentee tells them that someone called him a "fag" at school. Or they could role-play how they would respond if their mentee says that kids in her class are taunting her about her close friendship with another girl.

  At the same time, communication role-plays could include situations where the mentor needs to respond to homophobia that is expressed by the mentee. What would the mentor say, for example, if the youth referred to someone as a "fag," a word that is probably the most commonly used put-down in high schools. (As with put-downs that refer to race, ethnicity, disability, religion, or gender, negative references to sexual orientation are totally unacceptable. Unfortunately, these types of comments are still all too common. They should all be dealt with the same—as unacceptable. In addition, it is important to be aware that youth who sound the most homophobic may be acting that way to mask the fact that they are questioning their own sexual orientation.)

Training Activity

What's That Label on My Back?

Many of us believe we are much more open-minded than, in reality, we probably are. It is difficult to recognize our own habits of stereotyping and equally difficult to understand the effect they have on others. The following training activity is a good way to help people recognize the pervasiveness of stereotyping and its powerful negative effects. The activity is best done with a group of eight to 12 people. Save it for a second or third mentor training session, so people are at least fairly comfortable with each other. Do the activity at the very beginning of the session.

1. In advance: Prepare a sheet of 8 ½" X 11" paper for each participant in the training session. On each sheet, in large letters, write the name (or label) of one stereotyped group. Examples include: bag lady, homeless man, lesbian, gay male, fat man, young woman in a miniskirt wearing a lot of makeup, young black male wearing sunglasses and baggy pants. Be sure a different label appears on each sheet of paper.

2. As soon as all the training participants have arrived, walk around the room and pin one of the sheets of paper on each person's back. Do not let the person see what label is written on the paper.

3. Ask the participants to spend about 10 minutes walking around and talking to each other. Before they start talking to another person, they should be sure to read the label on that person's back so they know to whom they are talking. However, no one should tell anyone else what the label on their back is.

4. After about 10 minutes, stop the conversations. Ask if anyone can identify who they are—how the label on their back identifies them --based on how other people were talking to them.

5. Spend a few minutes debriefing about the experience. Focus on how participants felt when they were "labeled" in this way. Ask if they learned anything about themselves from the experience.

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- Provide information that will help mentors understand the particular risks faced by lesbian and gay youth. The information included in the Recognizing the Risks for Youth section of this guide is a useful starting point. Local organizations that work with lesbian and gay youth may be able to provide you with information about the youth in your particular community. The Additional Resources section can also lead you to more information.

- If you are training your mentors to deal with sexuality issues, be sure you address the sexuality of everyone, gay or straight. If mentors assume their mentees are heterosexual, they will not be able to help lesbian and gay youth make thoughtful decisions about safe (or no) sexual activity.

In addition, the Appendix includes "Tips for Volunteers: Mentoring Lesbian and Gay Youth," a two-page "best practices" list that you can use and discuss during mentor trainings.

And finally, if the person who usually conducts mentor training sessions for your program is not comfortable dealing with the subject of lesbian and gay youth, find someone else on your staff who can co-facilitate the trainings and knowledgeably address the issues. As an alternative, contact local organizations that serve the lesbian and gay community and ask for assistance in finding a trainer.

Additional Resources

FURTHER READING

Becoming Visible: A Reader in Gay and Lesbian History for High School and College Students
Kevin Jennings (editor). Alyson Publications, 1994. A useful resource for adults and youth. Drawing from both primary and secondary sources, this reader covers over 2,000 years of history and a diverse range of cultures.

Is It A Choice? Answers to 300 of the Most Frequently Asked Questions about Gays and Lesbians
by Eric Marcus. HarperCollins Publishers, 1993. A good source for information and facts.

Lesbian and Gay Youth: Care and Counseling
by Caitlin Ryan and Donna Futterman. Columbia University Press, 1997. An excellent publication for program staff and volunteers.

Two Teenagers in Twenty: Writings by Gay and Lesbian Youth
Ann Heron (editor). Alyson Publications, 1995. A collection of personal testimonies from lesbian and gay youth. Its primary audience is junior high and high school students, but it is also an good resource for staff development and mentor trainings.

VIDEO

"Our Faces"
A 22-minute educational video (with a five-minute addendum for professional audiences) that looks at the lives, trials, and joys of lesbian and gay youth, adults, and their families through their own eyes. Available through Educational Videos Plus, 715 143rd Avenue, NE #32, Bellevue, WA 98007, or www.educationalvideosplus.com.

CURRICULA FOR TRAINING MENTORS

These curricula all include activities for training mentors in communication skills and in recognizing and respecting cultural differences. While the material is not specifically focused on training mentors to communicate about, and respect, differences in sexual orientation and gender identity, a number of the activities can be adapted for that purpose.

Mentor Training Curriculum
National Mentoring Working Group, 1991. Available through The National Mentoring Partnership. Phone: (202) 338-3844; or through the Volunteer Marketplace Catalog. Phone: 1-800-272-8306.

Training Mentors—Part Two of Strengthening Mentoring Programs
by Linda Jucovy. Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory, Public/Private Ventures, Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, and Big Brothers Big Sisters of America, 1999. Available through the National Mentoring Center at NWREL, 101 S.W. Main Street, Suite 500, Portland, OR 97204. Phone: 1-800-547-6339.

Volunteer Education and Development Manual
Big Brothers Big Sisters of America, 1991. Available through BBBSA, 230 North 13th Street, Philadelphia, PA 19107. Phone: (215) 567-7000. E-mail: national@bbbsa.org.

Web Sites

www.apa.org/pi/lgbc
American Psychological Association, Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexual Concerns Office—includes resources that can be downloaded or ordered.

www.glsen.org
The Gay, Lesbian and Straight Education Network—an organization that focuses on K-to-12 schools. Its Web site includes resources and links.

www.nyacyouth.org
National Youth Advocacy Coalition—includes information on resources for supporting lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender youth.

www.pflag.org
Parents, Families, and Friends of Lesbians and Gays—includes information, excellent resources to download or print, and links.

www.smyal.org
Sexual Minority Youth Assistance League—includes information and links for adults and youth.

www.youthresource.com
Youth Resource—a Web site for lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender youth. Includes news, information, chat rooms, and links.

www.oasismag.com
Oasis Magazine—online magazine of the Youth Assistance Organization. Features articles by kids and adults, and information about issues affecting LGBT youth.

Listservs & Newsgroups

General Info:
P.E.R.S.O.N. Project News
e-mail to join: richter@eecs.berkeley.edu
www.youth.org/loco/PERSONProject/

Newsgroup:
"Soc.support.youth.gay-lesbian-bi" offers support, understanding, and friendship to young people who are coming to terms with their sexuality, which may differ from the heterosexual norm. Get all the information at www.youth.org/ssyglb/.

Youth Only:
The YOUTH E-mail Lists are a group of three e-mail mailing lists separated by age groups (13-17, 17-21, 21-25). The goal of these lists is to provide gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender and questioning youth an open forum to communicate with other youth.
www.youth-guard.org

HOTLINES

The Gay and Lesbian National Hotline: 1-888-THE-GLNH (1-888-843-4564). Callers speak to a trained volunteer and are then put in touch with a local referral anywhere in the country. The hotline also has a Web site: www.glnh.org.

The Trevor Helpline: 1-800-850-8078. A national 24-hour toll-free suicide prevention hotline for gay or questioning youth that is geared toward helping those in crisis, or anyone wanting information on how to help someone in crisis.

Appendix: Readings and Other Useful Materials

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Sexual Orientation Development

Sexual orientation is one component of a person's identity, which is made up of many other components, such as culture, ethnicity, gender, and personality traits. Sexual orientation is an enduring emotional, romantic, sexual, or affectional attraction that a person feels toward another person. Sexual orientation falls along a continuum. In other words, someone does not have to be exclusively homosexual or heterosexual, but can feel varying degrees of attraction for both genders. Sexual orientation develops across a person's lifetime—different people realize at different points in their lives that they are heterosexual, gay, lesbian, or bisexual.

- Sexual orientation is one component of a person's identity.
- Sexual orientation develops across a person's lifetime.
- The experience of gay, lesbian and bisexual teenagers if often one of isolation, fear of stigmatization and lack of peer or familial support.

Sexual behavior does not necessarily equate to sexual orientation. Many adolescents—as well as many adults—may identify themselves as homosexual or bisexual without having had any sexual experience. Other young people have had sexual experiences with a person of the same gender, but do not consider themselves to be gay, lesbian, or bisexual. This is particularly relevant during adolescence because it is a time for experimentation—a hallmark of this developmental period.

Gay, lesbian, and bisexual adolescents follow a developmental path that is both similar to and quite different from that followed by heterosexual adolescents. All teenagers face certain developmental challenges, such as developing social skills, thinking about career choices, and fitting into a peer group. Gay, lesbian, and bisexual youth must also cope with prejudiced, discriminatory, and violent behavior and messages in their families, schools, and communities. Such behavior and messages negatively affect the health, mental health and education of lesbian, gay, and bisexual young people. These students are more likely than heterosexual students to report missing school due to fear, being threatened by other students, and having their property damaged at school.[1] The promotion of "reparative therapy" and "transformational ministry" is likely to exacerbate the risk of harassment, harm, and fear.

For these reasons, the experience of gay, lesbian, and bisexual teenagers is often one of isolation, fear of stigmatization, and lack of peer or familial support. Gay, lesbian, and bisexual youth have few opportunities for observing positive modeling by adults due to the general cultural bias that makes gay, lesbian, and bisexual people largely invisible. It is this isolation and lack of

1. Garofalo, R., Wolf, R.C., Kessel, S., Palfrey, J., & Du Rant, R.H. (1998). The association between health risk behaviors and sexual orientation among a school-based sample of adolescents. *Pediatrics*, 101(5), 895-902.

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support that accounts in part for the higher rates of emotional distress,[2] suicide attempts,[3] and risky sexual behavior and substance use[4] that gay, lesbian, and bisexual students report compared to heterosexual students.

Because of their legitimate fear of being harassed or hurt, gay, lesbian, or bisexual youth are less likely to ask for help. Thus, it is important that their environments be as open and accepting as possible, so these young people will feel comfortable sharing their thoughts and concerns. To be able to provide an accepting environment, school personnel need to understand the nature of sexual orientation development and be supportive of healthy development for all youth.

"Coming out" refers to the process of acknowledging one's gay, lesbian, or bisexual attractions and identity to oneself and disclosing them to others. This process is different for every teenager; however, most adolescents disclose their sexual orientation to others in the following order: other gay, lesbian, and bisexual peers, close heterosexual peers, close family members, and finally, parents.[5]

Many people may wonder why gay, lesbian, and bisexual teenagers and adults feel the need to "come out," i.e., disclose their sexual orientation to others. This is actually the expression of a normal tendency to want to share personal information about oneself with important others, and should be treated as such by those around the gay, lesbian, or bisexual adolescent. It is healthy for teenagers to share with friends and families their latest crush or how they spent their weekend. This process, however, is often quite difficult for the gay, lesbian, or bisexual adolescent, because there is a strong (and well-founded) fear of being rejected by others. ■

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2. Resnick, M.D., Bearman, P.S., Blum, R.W., Bauman, K.E., Harris, K.S., Jones, J., Tabor, J., Beuhring, T., Sieving, R.E., Shew, M., Ireland, M., Bearing, L.H., & Udry, J.R., (1997). Protecting adolescents from harm: Findings from the National Longitudinal Study on Adolescent Health. *Journal of the American Medical Association*, 278(10), 823-832.
3. Garofalo, et al. 1998; Remafedi, G., Frendh, S., Story, M., Resnick, M.D., & Blum, R. (1998). The relationship between suicide risk and sexual orientation: Results of a population-based study. *American Journal of Public Health*, 88 (1), 57-60.
4. Garofalo et al. 1998; Resnick et al. 1997.
5. Ryan, C., & Futterman, D. (1997). Lesbian and gay youth: Care and counseling. *Adolescent Medicine: State of the Art Reviews*, 8(2). [Also published in 1998 by Columbia University Press.]

Excerpt from* Just the Facts About Sexual Orientation & Youth, *a publication developed by a consortium of organizations, including National Education Association, the American Psychological Association, the American Federation of Teachers, the National Association of School Psychologists, and the National Association of Social Workers.

The document can be downloaded from the PFLAG Web site at:
www.pflag.org/press/releases/112399.htm

a2

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Answers to Your Questions About Sexual Orientation and Homosexuality

What Is Sexual Orientation?
Sexual orientation is an enduring emotional, romantic, sexual or affectional attraction to another person. It is easily distinguished from other components of sexuality including biological sex, gender identity (the psychological sense of being male or female) and the social gender role (adherence to cultural norms for feminine and masculine behavior).

Sexual orientation exists along a continuum that ranges from exclusive homosexuality to exclusive heterosexuality and includes various forms of bisexuality. Bisexual persons can experience sexual, emotional and affectional attraction to both their own sex and the opposite sex. Persons with a homosexual orientation are sometimes referred to as gay (both men and women) or as lesbian (women only).

Sexual orientation is different from sexual behavior because it refers to feelings and self-concept. Persons may or may not express their sexual orientation in their behaviors.

What Causes a Person To Have a Particular Sexual Orientation?
There are numerous theories about the origins of a person's sexual orientation; most scientists today agree that sexual orientation is most likely the result of a complex interaction of environmental, cognitive and biological factors.

In most people, sexual orientation is shaped at an early age. There is also considerable recent evidence to suggest that biology, including genetic or inborn hormonal factors, play a significant role in a person's sexuality.

In summary, it is important to recognize that there are probably many reasons for a person's sexual orientation and the reasons may be different for different people.

Is Sexual Orientation a Choice?
No, human beings can not choose to be either gay or straight. Sexual orientation emerges for most people in early adolescence without any prior sexual experience. Although we can choose whether to act on our feelings, psychologists do not consider sexual orientation to be a conscious choice that can be voluntarily changed.

Can Therapy Change Sexual Orientation?
No. Even though most homosexuals live successful, happy lives, some homosexual or bisexual people may seek to change their sexual orientation through therapy, sometimes pressured by the influence of family members or religious groups to try and do so. The reality is that homosexuality is not an illness. It does not require treatment and is not changeable. However, not all gay, lesbian, and bisexual people who seek assistance from a mental health professional want to change their sexual orientation. Gay, lesbian, and bisexual people may seek psychological help with the coming out process or for strategies to deal with prejudice, but most go

into therapy for the same reasons and life issues that bring straight people to mental health professionals.

What About So-Called "Conversion Therapies"?
Some therapists who undertake so-called conversion therapy report that they have been able to change their clients' sexual orientation from homosexual to heterosexual. Close scrutiny of these reports however show several factors that cast doubt on their claims. For example, many of the claims come from organizations with an ideological perspective which condemns homosexuality. Furthermore, their claims are poorly documented. For example, treatment outcome is not followed and reported overtime as would be the standard to test the validity of any mental health intervention.

The American Psychological Association is concerned about such therapies and their potential harm to patients. In1997, the Association's Council of Representatives passed a resolution reaffirming psychology's opposition to homophobia in treatment and spelling out a client's right to unbiased treatment and self-determination. Any person who enters into therapy to deal with issues of sexual orientation has a right to expect that such therapy would take place in a professionally neutral environment absent of any social bias.

Is Homosexuality a Mental Illness or Emotional Problem?
No. Psychologists, psychiatrists and other mental health professionals agree that homosexuality is not an illness, mental disorder or an emotional problem. Over 35 years of objective, well-designed scientific research has shown that homosexuality, in and itself, is not associated with mental disorders or emotional or social problems. Homosexuality was once thought to be a mental illness because mental health professionals and society had biased information.

In the past the studies of gay, lesbian and bisexual people involved only those in therapy, thus biasing the resulting conclusions. When researchers examined data about these people who were not in therapy, the idea that homosexuality was a mental illness was quickly found to be untrue.

In 1973 the American Psychiatric Association confirmed the importance of the new, better designed research and removed homosexuality from the official manual that lists mental and emotional disorders. Two years later, the American Psychological Association passed a resolution supporting the removal.

For more than 25 years, both associations have urged all mental health professionals to help dispel the stigma of mental illness that some people still associate with homosexual orientation.

Can Lesbians, Gay Men, and Bisexuals Be Good Parents?
Yes. Studies comparing groups of children raised by homosexual and by heterosexual parents find no developmental differences between the two groups of children in four critical areas: their intelligence, psychological adjustment,social adjustment, and popularity with friends. It is also important to realize that a parent's sexual orientation does not indicate their children's. Another myth about homosexuality is the mistaken belief that gay men have more of a

tendency than heterosexual men to sexually molest children. There is no evidence to suggest that homosexuals molest children.

Why Do Some Gay Men, Lesbians and Bisexuals Tell People About Their Sexual Orientation?
Because sharing that aspect of themselves with others is important to their mental health. In fact, the process of identity development for lesbians, gay men and bisexuals called "coming out", has been found to be strongly related to psychological adjustment—the more positive the gay, lesbian, or bisexual identity, the better one's mental health and the higher one's self-esteem.

Why Is the "Coming Out" Process Difficult for Some Gay, Lesbian and Bisexual People?
For some gay and bisexual people the coming out process is difficult, for others it is not. Often lesbian, gay and bisexual people feel afraid, different, and alone when they first realize that their sexual orientation is different from the community norm. This is particularly true for people becoming aware of their gay, lesbian, or bisexual orientation as a child or adolescent, which is not uncommon. And, depending on their families and where they live, they may have to struggle against prejudice and misinformation about homosexuality.

Children and adolescents may be particularly vulnerable to the deleterious effects of bias and stereotypes. They may also fear being rejected by family, friends, co-workers, and religious institutions. Some gay people have to worry about losing their jobs or being harassed at school if their sexual orientation became well known.

Unfortunately, gay, lesbian and bisexual people are at a higher risk for physical assault and violence than are heterosexuals. Studies done in California in the mid 1990s showed that nearly one-fifth of all lesbians who took part in the study and more than one-fourth of all gay men who participated had been the victim of a hate crime based on their sexual orientation. In another California study of approximately 500 young adults, half of all the young men participating in the study admitted to some form of anti-gay aggression from name-calling to physical violence.

What Can Be Done to Overcome the Prejudice and Discrimination the Gay Men, Lesbians, and Bisexuals Experience?
Research has found that the people who have the most positive attitudes toward gay men, lesbians and bisexuals are those who say they know one or more gay, lesbian or bisexual person well—often as a friend or co-worker. For this reason, psychologists believe negative attitudes toward gay people as a group are prejudices that are not grounded in actual experiences but are based on stereotypes and prejudice. Furthermore, protection against violence and discrimination are very important, just as they are for any other minority groups. Some states include violence against an individual on the basis of his or her sexual orientation as a "hate crime" and ten U.S. states have laws against discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation.

Why is it Important for Society to be Better Educated About Homosexuality?
Educating all people about sexual orientation and homosexuality is likely to diminish anti-gay

prejudice. Accurate information about homosexuality is especially important to young people who are first discovering and seeking to understand their sexuality—whether homosexual, bisexual, or heterosexual. Fears that access to such information will make more people gay have no validity—information about homosexuality does not make someone gay or straight.

Are All Gay and Bisexual Men HIV Infected?
No. This is a commonly held myth. In reality, the risk of exposure to HIV is related to a person's behavior, not their sexual orientation. What's important to remember about HIV/AIDS is it is a preventable disease through the use of safe sex practices and by not using drugs.

Where Can I Find More Information About Homosexuality?
APA Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexual Concerns Program
750 First Street, NE. Washington, DC 20002
Email: publicinterest@apa.org

National Gay and Lesbian Task Force
2320 17th St. Washington, DC 20009 (202)-332-6483
Email: NGLTF@NGLTF.org

Parents, Families and Friends of Lesbians and Gays
1726 M Street, NW Suite 400 Washington, DC 20036. phone: (202) 467-8180
Email: info@pflag.org

Sexuality Information and Education Council of the United States
130 W 42nd St., Ste. 350 New York, NY 10036 (212)-819-9770
Email: Siecuse@siecus.org

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Definitions

Sexual Orientation
Refers to whether a person is attracted to people of the same sex (homosexual), opposite sex (heterosexual), or both sexes (bisexual). The factors that determine sexual orientation are complex. Many researchers believe that one's basic sexual orientation is predisposed at birth. While these affectional inclinations may not be recognized or acknowledged for many years, once established, they tend not to change.

People sometimes ask, "What is the difference between 'sexual preference' and 'sexual orientation'?" Preference implies choice, while orientation does not. "Sexual orientation" is the term used instead of "sexual preference" by most gay, lesbian, and bisexual people because it better represents their life experiences.

Homosexual
An individual who is emotionally and/or sexually attracted primarily to those of the same gender. Homosexuality is far more than sexual behavior. It is the complete package of feelings and relationships that make up a natural and satisfying identity.

The word "queer" has historically been used as a derogatory label for lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender people. More recently, many people in the gay community have "taken back" the word and use it in a positive way for self-identification. However, there are other gay people who dislike the label "queer" and resent its use. Similarly, terms such as "dyke" and "butch" can be used in derogatory ways, but have been reclaimed by many lesbians as terms of pride.

Heterosexual
An individual who is emotionally and/or sexually attracted primarily to those of the opposite gender. Heterosexual people are sometimes referred to as "straight."

Heterosexism
The assumption that everyone—at least everyone worthwhile—is heterosexual. It is a form of oppression (like other forms of oppression such as racism, sexism, and classism) that targets gays, lesbians, and bisexuals. Heterosexism infers rights and privileges to heterosexuals that are denied to gay, lesbian, and bisexual people. It can manifest itself through personal behaviors (telling "faggot" jokes, verbal and physical harassment), and discriminatory policies such as denial of health and retirement benefits to lesbian and gay partners.

Homophobia
The irrational fear, disgust, or hatred of gays, lesbians, or bisexuals. Homophobia refers to the discomfort one feels with any behavior, belief, or attitude that does not conform to traditional sex-role stereotypes. Homophobia results in fear of knowing, befriending, or associating with gays, lesbians, or bisexuals; fear of being perceived as gay, lesbian, or bisexual; and fear of stepping outside of accepted gender role behavior.

Internalized Homophobia
The internalization (by lesbian, gay, and bisexual youth and adults) of the belief that same-gender sexual orientation is inferior to heterosexual orientation. This internalization of negative messages and feelings about oneself often leads to difficulty with self-acceptance and to self-hate.

Gender Identity
Refers to whether a person identifies as a female or male, regardless of that person's biological sex.

Transgender
Transgender people are those whose psychological self ("gender identity") differs from the social expectations for the physical sex they were born with.

In the Closet
Not disclosing (coming out), or being secretive about one's sexual orientation and/or gender identity.

Coming Out
The process of becoming aware of and understanding and accepting one's sexual orientation and/or gender identity. "Coming out" also refers to the ongoing process of decisionmaking about the level of openness a person feels in disclosing this information to another person or people.

Pink Triangle and Rainbow Triangle
Symbols of lesbian and gay pride and solidarity. When displayed by straight people, the triangles are also symbols of acceptance of all sexual orientations. During the Nazi reign in Europe, homosexuals were arrested and sent to concentration camps, where they were forced to wear pink triangles on their clothes. Thus, the pink triangle is a way of remembering and "owning" what was once a symbol of oppression. The rainbow triangle, a similar symbol, incorporates the visual metaphor of inclusiveness that is at the heart of Jesse Jackson's Rainbow Coalition.

(Definitions are based in part on the list created by Aaron Hans for the Sexual Minority Youth Assistance League, www.smyal.org***, and "Questions Straight Folks Often Ask, " UCLA Lesbian Gay Bisexual Transgender Resource Center Web site,*** www.lgbt.ucla.edu.***)***

Sample Statement on Diversity

An organization's staff and board members can work together to write a policy statement that defines the organization's acceptance of all people. The statement need not be complex. An example follows.

[Name of organization] is committed to providing all youth with a safe and supportive environment. All youth will be welcomed and accepted, regardless of their race, gender, national origin, sexual orientation, gender identity, religion, or disability.

Staff and volunteers are expected to be role models in demonstrating that all people are entitled to respect.

Tips for Professionals Who Work with Gay Youth

1 **Dont be surprised when a youth "comes out" to you.** They have tested you with a series of "trial balloons" over a period of time. Based on your previous responses they've decided you can be trusted and helpful.

2 **Respect confidentiality.** If a gay, lesbian, bisexual or transgender youth shares with you information about his or her sexual orientation, you have a trust that must be respected. A breach of this confidence has led some to suicide.

3 **Be informed & examine your own biases.** Most of us are the products of a homophobic society influenced by misinformation and fear. You can't be free of it just by deciding to; read reliable sources and talk to qualified persons.

4 **Know when and where to seek help.** Know the referral agencies and counselors in your area. Gay helplines can provide you with professional persons and organizations that are qualified to help. Tell them who you are and what kind of assistance you need. They'll be helpful and fair.

5 **Maintain a balanced perspective** Sexual thoughts and feelings are only a small (but important) part of a person's personality.

6 **Understand the meaning of sexual orientation.** Each person's sexual orientation is what is natural to that person. It is not a matter of sexual "preference." People do not choose to be gay or lesbian; they simply are.

7 **Deal with feelings first.** Most gay and lesbian youth feel alone, afraid and guilty. You can assist by listening, thus allowing them to release feelings and thoughts that are often in conflict.

8 **Be supportive.** Explain that many people have struggled with this issue in the past. Admit that dealing with one's sexuality is difficult. It defies easy and fast answers, whether heterosexual, bisexual, gay, lesbian or transgender. Keep the door open for more conversations and assistance.

9 **Anticipate some confusion.** Most youth are sure of their sexual orientation by the time they finish the eight grade. But some young people will be confused and unsure. They have to work through their own feeling and insights; you can't talk them into, or out of being gay, lesbian, bisexual or transgender.

10 **Help but do not force.** If you are heterosexual, you probably do not understand what it means to be different in this manner. Clues for how you can help will come from the young person. Don't force him or her into your frame of reference to make it easier for you to understand.

11 **Don't try to guess who's gay or lesbian.** It is not helpful for you or for the youth you serve. We live in a world of stereotypes that do people an injustice; do not be tempted to perpetuate old myths.

12 **Challenge homophobic remarks and jokes.** Would you be silent if someone made a racial slur or disparaging remark about someone's race? If not, then speak up. Don't perpetuate injustice through silence.

Used with permission from PFLAG (Parents, Families, and Friends of Lesbians and Gays: 1726 M Street, NW Suite 400 Washington, DC 20036. phone: (202) 467-8180)

This resource can be found on their web site at:
www.pflag.org/store/resource/tips.html.

Tips for Staff Development

This article was written by the Gay, Lesbian and Straight Education Network (GLSEN), an organization whose mission is to end homophobia in K-12 schools. While the article specifically addresses providing staff development for teachers, its approach can be easily adapted for training staff in your program, as well as for training mentors. (Note that this article uses the term "gay" all-inclusively to refer to people who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgendered.)

GLSEN's trainings on issues of homophobia, devised by and for teachers, have been hailed as uniquely successful in reaching school staffs. Based on their success, the following lessons are offered for those trying to establish staff development programs.

1. Address resistance right away.
Many educators will be initially skeptical about a staff development program on gay issues. Some will be downright hostile, citing personal or religious objections to such programming. Many may feel the agenda is "brainwashing" or imposed acceptance of gay people: suspicious of the developer's motives, they can quickly tune out of any presentation, no matter how thoughtful or well-crafted.

To deal with this obstacle, an instrument called the Riddle Scale can be useful. Developed by Dorothy Riddle, an Arizona psychiatrist, the Riddle Scale ranks attitudes toward difference on an eight-point scale, from "repulsion" ("people who are different are strange") to "nurturance" ("difference is indispensable to society"). Staff need to understand that trainers respect their personal beliefs and their desire to hold whatever private feelings they might have on gay issues. However, staff can use the Riddle Scale to effectively illustrate the difference between personal beliefs and professional responsibilities. We all harbor likes and dislikes; however, we must all be at step 5 of the Riddle Sale, "support" ("I work to safeguard the rights of those who are different") when it comes to our students. We do not have the right to allow our personal prejudices to interfere with our professional conduct, and staff must understand that appropriate professional conduct is what will be addressed in training-not "sensitivities" or "awareness."

I often use the following analogy myself. My father, a fundamentalist evangelist, thought all Jews would go to hell, as they had not accepted Christ as their personal savior. He was entitled to this belief which, on the Riddle Scale, is akin to repulsion. In fact, as a former history teacher, I know that he has a constitutional right to believe this, thanks to our First Amendment. However, if he were to become a professional educator, he would not be free to create, or allow to be created, a climate in his classroom that is so anti-Semitic that Jewish students cannot learn. He would have a job to support all of his students so they could get an education and, if his personal prejudices would get in the way of fulfilling that obligation, then he would need to revise his conduct so that it would be more professional. Helping staff understand that it is the same for gay students—regardless of one's personal beliefs about gay people—can help them understand the rationale for training at the outset.

2. Get rid of the guilt factor.
Discussion about prejudice often makes individuals feel guilty and, in their desire not to feel bad about themselves, many are resistant to talking about the subject, since they feel that such guilt is either the goal or the intent of the workshop. It is important to recognize early in the workshop that homophobia and heterosexism are deeply ingrained attitudes which all people possess to one degree or another, regardless of sexual orientation. Since we were all raised in the same society, we inevitably absorbed its attitudes, and to think we could somehow escape attitudes as pervasive as homophobia and heterosexism is naive and delusional. No one is innocent; therefore, no one should feel guilty. Talk about this early on and get it out of the way so participants can hear your message, rather then become too involved in their own reactions to the message.

3. Link training to core values of the school (or organization).
As a classroom teacher, I often dreaded faculty trainings. I didn't see how they helped me in my teaching, and often felt they were frills that had nothing to do with what I was paid for doing. With an issue whose "strangeness" is as apparent as homophobia, the potential for such reactions among staff is quite strong.

The only way to deal effectively with this issue is to make sure that the staff understands how this topic is linked to core values of the school. Many schools have mission statements, or at least "buzzwords," which are key to understanding how they see themselves and their job. It is important to show how the work you will undertake with them will help fulfill this mission and help them be better teachers. If you can't show how what you're doing will help them work more effectively with kids, you've probably lost them right away.

4. Make it real.
Teachers care about kids. If they don't see a subject as somehow pertaining to their students, they quickly lose interest. Overcoming this challenge can be hard when dealing with homophobia issues. Because the climate in our schools is so hostile for gay people, few (if any) students self-identify as gay to staff, and many staff may feel that this issue simply isn't relevant in their community. The developer must make it real for them.

Focusing on student stories is the best way to do this. I have found three ways to do this: live speakers, available often through local youth support groups; 'read-arounds," a technique wherein staff read aloud from written stories culled from personal acquaintances or from books like Ann Heron's *Two Teenagers in Twenty*; and video excerpts, particularly from Pam Walton's excellent "Gay Youth." By bringing it back to stories of real students, trainers can reinforce the sense among staff that this is an issue that has real pertinence to their daily work.

5. Leave time for talking.
Teachers like to talk—that's why a lot of us went into this profession in the first place! But, especially on an issue like this, people need to talk as well. Given the current rebellion against all things "politically correct," it is critical when addressing homophobia to create a space where everyone can be heard—even if what they have to say is objectionable to the trainer. By allowing people a chance to engage with the subject—rather than presenting them with "the answer"—your message is much more likely to be well-received and to "stick." As the

proverb goes, "I hear and I forget; I see and I remember; I do and I understand." Allow participants the chance to do the talking, and thinking, for themselves, and they are more likely to truly get involved with the issue.

6. Offer specific suggestions.
Nothing is worse than having your consciousness raised and then having no avenue for follow-up. Many staff will be moved and "ready to go" as a result of workshops, but often are disappointed or frustrated by the lack of a means to convert their new understanding into action. Offering examples of actions can help staff feel empowered to take their learnings and move ahead. We also ask participants to write down a specific step they will take and, on occasion, put it in a self-addressed, stamped envelope which we mail back to them three months later. Simple actions like this can help make the difference between a workshop whose effects are like Chinese food (gone in an hour) and one that's like chocolate (stuck on your hips forever).

7. Designate responsibility for follow-up.
I often publicly ask at the end of a workshop who is responsible for implementing the kinds of changes we discuss, and make sure everyone knows who that is. Accountability is crucial: if a key individual takes responsibility in front of the group for making change, it is more likely to happen. In the best of all possible worlds, a structure is the best way to insure follow-up. Designating a committee or working group that will be charged with monitoring progress is the best way to insure follow-up. But, through any means necessary, make sure that there is a plan for follow-up after the workshop, or else it will all come to naught.

8. Come back often.
Given the pervasiveness of homophobia, it is unrealistic to expect "one-shot" trainings to have much effect. It took us all many years to learn homophobia, and it will take some time to unlearn. People eat best in bite-sized chunks, which they can chew and digest properly. New ideas often need to be consumed in the same way. If a series of shorter sessions can be established to follow up on initial training, staff will get the chance to mull things over, try out some actions, and then assimilate what they have learned. Spreading development out over a longer time period will give it more of a chance to "sink in."

9. Involve the Community
Schools are communities, and staff development cannot proceed in a vacuum. Students, parents, and citizens all are stockholders in our schools and any comprehensive effort to bring about change must involve all of them. If homophobic attitudes and actions are sanctioned outside school doors, no amount of staff development will ever make the school a safe place. Furthermore, parents and community members will have questions about a "gay agenda" in their schools, and may be suspicious or resistant to initiatives arising out of staff development on the issue. If it's going to work, they've got to be involved.

Students are obviously the easiest to reach. Having assembles, designating a given subject class as a place to institute smaller-group discussions, and similar steps can all help raise the issue with them. Parents are a little harder, although PTA-sponsored evening trainings have proven very successful in many communities. Parents, Family, and Friends of Lesbians and Gays is a wonderful resource to call upon here. A Mom is much more likely to listen to

another Mom than a staff developer, so involving PFLAG can be critical to success. The community at large is the hardest to get at. Making sure that they are aware of, and invited to participate in, programming can defuse some tensions. Many will just want to know what is going on: invite them and, for those who cannot come, make an audio or video tape so they can have their fears allayed.

All of these steps will not change the fact that some adults will fight such initiatives. However, giving them the chance to get involved, and making sure you can link your work to the core mission of the school, is likely to keep the number of resistant adults to a minimum, and will also win trust from the community that their school is "doing the right thing." It's their school: invite them to become a bigger part of it. But keep in mind that, if you plan to dislodge long-held biases, some people will get upset. That comes with the territory, and in many ways is more a tribute to your effectiveness than anything else.

Conclusion: Making a Difference That Matters

Staff development on gay issues is in many ways the final frontier of diversity work, and no one has all the answers on how to do it right. Because of the political volatility of the subject in today's climate, many want to shy away from it. We can't do that. The fact is, our students are at risk, and our schools less able to educate, because homophobia goes unchallenged in so many communities. Staff can play the key role in challenging that, and staff development can be the tool which makes that change a reality. Boldly go where few staff developers have ever gone before. Some kid's life is depending on it.

Reprinted with permission from "Staff Development on Homophobia Issues: Why Schools Need To Act, and What They Can Do." © 2000. Gay, Lesbian & Straight Education Network. The complete resource can be found on the GLSEN Web site at:
www.glsen.org/templates/resources/record.html?section=18&record=382.

Tips for Volunteers: Mentoring Lesbian and Gay Youth

Lesbian and gay youth are an invisible and forgotten minority of Americans. Along with the many other problems that adolescents must deal with, they often face profound feelings of social and emotional isolation that have been linked to increased rates of depression and suicide, substance abuse, and other self-damaging behaviors.

AS A MENTOR:

- **Do not assume that the youth you are mentoring is heterosexual.**
  Your mentee may be a lesbian or gay youth and may not feel safe revealing this information to you.

- **Recognize that you cannot tell whether someone is straight or gay just by looking at him or her.**
  Many people wrongly assume that gay men and lesbians can be easily identified based on their mannerisms or way of talking, dressing, or cutting their hair. Try not to make assumptions about your mentee based on stereotypes.

- **Use inclusive language. Be accepting and open.**
  Try to use nonspecific pronouns when talking about your mentee's "crushes" or "romantic interests" until she or he mentions that person's gender (boyfriend, girlfriend). Even if a mentee mentions a boyfriend/girlfriend of the opposite sex, don't assume that your mentee is straight. Your mentee could be questioning her/his sexual identity, or covering up her/his lesbian or gay identity. If your mentee does not specify the gender of a "romantic interest," this may mean she/he is not comfortable disclosing her/his sexual orientation to you. Continue using inclusive language. Try to communicate an open and accepting attitude. In time, your mentee may feel comfortable coming out to you.

- **Use the vocabulary the youth uses.**
  If your mentee uses the word "homosexual," follow his or her lead. Likewise, if he or she says "gay" or "lesbian," use that term. Do not use such terms unless the youth does first. Many youth, including those who have had homosexual experiences, are confused or uncertain about their sexual orientation and have not identified as gay or lesbian.

- **Be supportive of mentees who identify as heterosexual but are attracted to people of the same sex.**
  Because of the stigma attached to homosexuality, people who feel attracted to, or have sexual relationships with, individuals of the same gender often do not self-identify as lesbian or gay. If your mentee expresses discomfort about her/his attraction to someone of the same gender, do not try to convince or reassure the mentee that she/he is straight. Your words may be well-intentioned, but they will only add to the stigma around homosexuality. Instead, help your mentee explore her/his own feelings and provide support as the youth works to reach her/his own conclusions.

- **Be alert to any sudden changes in your mentee's attitude about homosexuality.**
  A young person who, for the first time, recognizes his/her attraction to a person of the same gender or engages in sexual activity with someone of the same gender is likely to feel confused and might react to these feelings by expressing anti-gay attitudes. If your mentee does begin to use language that stereotypes and denigrates gay males and/or lesbians, try to help your mentee explore why he/she is thinking and talking in this way.

- **Be willing to talk to your mentee about sexual orientation.**
  A person struggling with her or his sexual identity is likely to experience confusion, embarrassment, and discomfort. Understand that these feelings are an expected part of coming to terms with a lesbian or gay identity. If your mentee raises this issue, be willing to listen and to support your mentee in clarifying her or his feelings about sexual orientation.

- **Maintain confidentiality.**
  As with all mentor-mentee relationships, confidentiality is extremely important. You must keep a mentee's sexual orientation confidential. If you "out" your mentee (tell someone directly or indirectly that the mentee is a lesbian or gay), you could put the youth in jeopardy of losing family and friends, being abused or assaulted, or experiencing numerous other problems. When dealing with youth, it is especially important to protect confidentiality with respect to their parents knowing that they are gay. Many young people have been kicked out of their homes and abused by parents who could not accept their homosexuality. A well-meaning disclosure could put a young person at risk.

- **Educate yourself and provide accurate information.**
  Lesbian and gay youth often believe the same myths and stereotypes as society at large. Providing them with accurate information that dispels myths about what it means to be lesbian or gay can lessen their sense of isolation and shame. Read books, attend workshops, and become aware of resources in your community and on the Internet.

- **Remember that you are not a counselor.**
  If your mentee is struggling with issues of sexual identity and needs additional help beyond your support, encourage her or him to use resources that are available in the community. If your mentee is considering "coming out" to her or his parent and is unsure how the parent will respond, help her/him to access counselors who have expertise in this area in order to receive guidance before making the decision. (Local resources are listed under the heading "Gay and Lesbian Service Organizations" in the Yellow Pages of the telephone book. To find both local and national organizations for lesbian and gay youth, you can also use a search engine like yahoo.com on the Internet. To conduct the search, enter the phrase "lesbian and gay youth organizations." Yahoo will then generate a list of more than 150 organizations that you can access over the Internet as a first step toward getting more information.)

- **Be aware of your own attitudes toward, and stereotypes of, gay males and lesbians.**
  Perhaps you know that your level of acceptance of homosexuality is not where you want it to be. Keep working on it! Such awareness is crucial, as it allows you to take extra care not to let your personal feelings interfere with your ability to be a nonjudgmental, supportive adult in your mentee's life. At the same time, if you view a person's homosexuality as "sinful," "unnatural," or something that can and should be changed, you should probably find a volunteer role that does not include mentoring. The risk is that your judgments about homosexuality could add pain to what a youth is already experiencing.

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Coming Out : A Resource Guide For Young People

If you are a young person who knows that you are or thinks that you might be gay, lesbian, bisexual, or transgender, you've probably heard the term "coming out." But what does it really mean to come out?

In reality, coming out means different things to different people. It can mean accepting yourself; telling someone for the first time that you are gay*; reading a book about being gay; or experiencing your first same-sex relationship.

And coming out isn't just a one time thing. In each new situation, with new people, you have to decide whether or not to come out. Even with people you've already told, you'll find out that you come out to them again and again: when you first tell them you're gay, when you introduce them to your boyfriend or girlfriend, when you talk to them about gay rights issues.

Each situation in which you come out will be different, and coming out is not always the right thing to do. If you think someone might react violently toward you, might begin to gossip about you, or might harm you in some other way, then coming out may not be the best choice.

Many people who are gay, lesbian, bisexual or transgender do, however, reach a point where they want to come out to others. They no longer want to spend their energy hiding who they are. However and whenever you choose to come out, remember that it is a process and it requires a great deal of courage. It means risking rejection from others who may not be ready to accept the fact that you are gay. But it also means giving yourself the opportunity to gain support from the people you care about most. Remember, no one but you should decide whether or not you should come out.

"A few years ago I was too scared to tell anyone that I was a lesbian. I just avoided the subject. Boyfriend? No. Now I am more comfortable with it all. The other day some guy at school asked me if I had a boyfriend and I said, No, do you? He said, I have a girlfriend. Yeah, I said, me too."

-A SMYAL Youth

Coming Out To Yourself

Perhaps the most important step in the coming out process involves coming out to yourself. This means more than just knowing that you probably or definitely are gay, lesbian, bisexual, or transgender. It also means being able to accept and feel comfortable with your sexual identity. Although for some people this is a relatively easy process, most find that this can take a long time.

Along the way to accepting themselves, most people who are gay, lesbian, bisexual or transgender experience a wide range of feelings. Some feel relieved when they realize they are gay, because it helps explain why they always felt different from everyone else; but many others feel guilty, ashamed, scared, or lonely. While there is no "right" or "wrong" way to feel, it is important to remember that these feelings are usually the result of hearing homophobic messages from society. Your feelings of attraction to the same sex may be perfectly natural and normal for you, but the negative messages sent by society can make this very difficult to accept.

Some people who are in the process of coming out to themselves find that reading books or magazines about being gay can help. Other people contact organizations that serve gay and lesbian youth, in order to talk to someone who cares or to meet other gay youth. Sharing your own feelings and hearing about how other people have coped can help you to feel less alone.

* We use the term "gay" throughout this document to include people who identify as gay, lesbian, bisexual or transgender.

SMYAL
A Safe Place to Be Who You Are

410 7th Street, SE
Washington, DC 20003-2707

202-546-5940 Tel
202-544-1306 Fax
202-546-7796 TTY
SMYAL@aol.com

Coming Out : A Resource Guide (Continued)

Coming Out To Others

Usually, when people use the term "coming out," they are talking about telling other people that they are gay, lesbian, bisexual, or transgender. If you aren't sure how people will react, it's usually safest to wait to come out to others until you are sure about and more comfortable with your identity. If you feel uncertain, your parents or friends will pick up on this and it may increase their own feelings of confusion. Their questions may begin to make you feel more confused as well. But if you feel confident about your gay identity, this may not only help make it easier for others to accept the fact that you are gay, but may help you feel good about yourself even if other people react negatively.

When deciding who to tell, try to choose people who will respect your privacy. If you don't want the whole school to know, then it's probably not the best idea to tell someone who you know just can't keep a secret. It's also a good idea to first tell only those people who you are pretty certain will be supportive. Even with such people, however, you should be prepared that they may be shocked and confused, or feel betrayed that you've kept such an important piece of information from them.

"I didn't do the slow coming out. I found myself a flaming queen who was busting the door down daring anyone to oppose my decision. While I found a tidal wave of support from friends there was an onslaught of prejudice from the student body at my school. It was pretty rough."

- From a letter we received from a youth in Tennessee.

Just as you had to cope with a range of difficult feelings as you were trying to accept yourself, remember that family members and friends will also have a wide range of feelings when they learn that you are gay. Some may be immediately supportive, but others will need you to give them time to come to terms with the fact that you are gay. Sharing your feelings — letting them know how much their support and acceptance means and how fearful you've been of losing their support — may help them understand how difficult coming out can be.

Finally, just as reading books or contacting groups for gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender youth may have helped when you were coming out to yourself, it can also help in coming out to others. If you've done your homework, you'll be able to answer people's questions about what it means to be gay. You can help correct their stereotypes and let them know that people who are gay can lead happy, fulfilling lives. If your loved ones need support coping with the fact that you are gay, you'll also have a list of supportive organizations handy.

Final Words

Coming out is a big decision. It's not always easy to tell in advance how people will react. Sometimes, a person you thought would support you instead will turn their back on you. Other times, the person you thought was really homophobic will completely rethink their views. They might even end up becoming a gay rights activist!

The most important thing to remember is to decide carefully. Trust your own feelings about whether it's safe to come out. Try to choose a time and a place that is private, where you and your loved one will really have a chance to talk. Hopefully, things will go well, but if they don't, try to find support for yourself. You deserve to feel good about being the person you were born to be!

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Washington, DC 20003-2707

202-546-5940 Tel
202-544-1306 Fax
202-546-7796 TTY
smyal@aol.com

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Coming Out to Your Parents: Questions to Think About

For gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender youth, coming out to parents is a decision with potentially life-altering consequences. While most all youth hope for their parents' acceptance, many fear rejection.

Although many parents do react negatively at first to finding out their child is gay, lesbian, bisexual or transgender, over time most come to accept this fact, especially if the parents receive support in dealing with their own feelings. For youth who are supported and accepted by their parents, coming out can even improve the relationship. Being honest about who they are allows them to be closer to their parents.

For other youth, however, the decision to come out has negative consequences. Some youth are forced to leave home, cut off emotionally and financially. Other parents may become abusive toward their child. In such cases, the family relationship may never recover because of the parents' overwhelmingly negative reaction.

"I didn't know what to do because she was crying. She kept saying 'What did I do to deserve this?' She even called the pastor of our church... One day, after trying and trying, I finally sat down with my mom and made her understand. Three years have passed and now she's pretty cool."

- A SMYAL Youth describing his coming out experience.

Because of the potential hazards involved in coming out to parents, the following are some questions young people should ask themselves before deciding to come out:

What is your current relationship with your parents like?

Do you feel that you have a good relationship with your parents? Have they shown that they will love and accept you even when they are upset with you or disapprove of something you've done? Or do they react harshly when you don't conform to their standards or wishes? If you generally have a warm, positive relationship and have been comfortable talking with them in the past, then it is more likely that your relationship will survive.

What are your parents' general reactions to gay* people?

Have you heard your parents make positive comments about gay* people or do they typically put them down or describe them negatively? Do they have friends who are gay? If your parents generally are accepting toward gay or lesbian people, they may be more likely to accept you. Parents who have very rigid moral beliefs and are convinced that homosexuality is sinful or immoral are likely to have more difficulty dealing with your sexual orientation.

Do you have other sources of emotional and financial support?

If your parents' reaction is overwhelmingly negative, are there people you can turn to for emotional support? If you were forced to leave home, do you have a safe place to stay and a source of financial support? If not, and you believe that your parents will react very negatively, it may be safer to wait until you are financially independent and until you have built a network of supportive people who can help you feel good about yourself.

SMYAL
A Safe Place to Be Who You Are

410 7th Street, SE
Washington, DC 20003-2707

202-546-5940 Tel
202-544-1386 Fax
202-546-7796 TTY
SMYAL@aol.com

* We use the term "gay" throughout this document to include people who identify as gay, lesbian, bisexual or transgender.

Coming Out to Your Parents (Continued)

Are you certain about and comfortable with your sexual orientation?

Parents will usually want to know if you are sure about being gay, lesbian, bisexual or transgender. If you are feeling confused, this will probably increase your parents' confusion and make them less sure about your judgment. On the other hand, if you are feeling strong and comfortable with yourself, this can help your parents to be more comfortable too.

For those youth who have truly open-minded, understanding parents, coming out even before you have fully accepted yourself may be appropriate. Such parents can lend their support as you struggle to come to terms with your identity.

Do you feel prepared to deal with your parents' questions and concerns?

Your parents may have many questions or fears about what being gay means for you. Most of their information will likely be based on what they have learned from a homophobic society. They may be worried that being gay will put you in danger or make you unable to lead a happy life. If you've done your homework — including reading books about being gay or lesbian — you'll be able to reassure them and tell them where they can get more information and support.

"Who's David? my mom asked when she picked me up at the train station. She told me she found a letter from him and wanted to know who he was. Never in my life had I been so scared. Should I lie? I thought about it for a second before I finally said . . . David's my boyfriend."

- A SMYAL Youth describing his coming out experience.

What is your reason for coming out now, and is this the best time?

Think through why you've chosen to come out to your parents now. Hopefully, it's because you want to have a closer, more honest relationship with them. Sharing this reason with your parents may help them to be more accepting. Likewise, try to pick a time when your parents are relaxed, rather than stressed out. If they have recently experienced a major loss, such as the death of a loved one, consider waiting. Most parents who learn that their child is gay feel, at least initially, that they have lost the child they knew. It can be harder for them to get over this "loss" if they are already grieving over other losses.

Will you be able to give your parents time to accept this?

Remember, it may have taken you a long time to accept that you are gay, lesbian, bisexual, or transgender. Think about your initial reactions when you first started realizing you were gay. Maybe you denied it, decided it was "just a phase," or felt guilty and wished you could change. Your parents may go through many of the same reactions. While some parents are immediately accepting of their child, others take months or even years before they begin to accept their child's sexual orientation. If you just don't think you can be patient and deal calmly with your parents' feelings of shock, anger, guilt or shame, then this may not be the right time to come out.

Is this really your decision?

Be certain that this is really what you want to do. Don't be pressured into coming out by well-meaning friends or counselors. You are the best judge of how your parents will react, and only you should make this important decision.

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410 7th Street, SE
Washington, DC 20003-2707

202-546-5940 Tel
202-544-1306 Fax
202-546-7796 TTY
SMYAL@aol.com

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Nortwest Regional Educational Laboratory

Staff:

Interim Director: Dr. Rex Hagans
Training Coordinators: Christian Rummell & Vikki Rennick
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Management Assistant: Sherryl Glenn
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Scott Peterson

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National Mentoring Center
@
Northwest Regional
Educational Laboratory

101 S.W. Main Street, suite 500
Portland, OR 97204
1-800-547-6339

mentorcenter@nwrel.org
www.nwrel.org/mentoring

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